COURTESY OF HARRISON GREENBAUM’S 
WHAT’S YOUR PROBLEM?

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by LYDIALLYE GIBSON

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ers were already on their feet, and a handful of students were dancing on stage. Behind Sethi, the tabla player’s fingers flew across the drums, pounding out a rhythm that was intricate, ecstatic, irresistible.

It was the headlining concert at Harvard’s ArtsFirst Festival last May, and the song, “Dama Dam Mast Qalandar,” is a South Asian favorite, with a melody composed in the 1960s and lyrics drawn from a thirteenth-century poem honoring the Sufi saint Lal Shabba Qalandar. The work is often performed at Qalandar’s shrine in southwestern Pakistan, where pilgrims commune with the divine by taking part in dhamal, a whirling, pounding, trancelike dance. Inside the song’s feverish rhythms, Sethi told the audience, traditional boundar-
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Something similar seems to happen with Sethi’s music: boundaries fall away—be-
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tics. “We are many and we are one,” he says. A singer classically trained in Pakistani tra-
ditional music, whose voice can shift from plaintive to raw to warmly intimate, Sethi (pronounced say-tee) has become a star in (and, increasingly, beyond) Pakistan. Since 2012, when he appeared on the soundtrack for the film The Reluctant Fundamentalist (di-
rected by Mira Nair ’79), he has toured internationally and become a regular presence on Coke Studio, Pakistan’s popular live-music television show. This past April he made his debut at Carnegie Hall as one of three so-
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10 years and recently began touring: Harrison Greenbaum’s What Just Happened? It combines the rhythm of stand-up—a laugh every 10 or 20 seconds—with the suspense of a magic show, weaving in original tricks that connect to the jokes. The show bears out a conviction Greenbaum often preaches when he speaks at magic conventions: tricks, like stand-up jokes, should start with an idea. “Comedians come up with an idea first, and then figure out a funny way to say it,” he says. “In magic, a lot of people go out and buy a trick and just jam it into their act.” But if magic is an art form—and Greenbaum believes it is—then its practitioners, he says, should strive for originality and self-expression, should be willing to push the envelope in ways that feel political or personal. “When I give lec-
tures on magic, I always encourage people to break stuff. ‘Just break stuff and see what happens. You’ll figure out how to put it back together.’” After all, it’s magic.

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In What’s Your Problem? he stops New Yorkers on the street and invites them into his roving “office” for some comedic talk therapy.

battle-tested jokes is about Roy Sullivan, a park ranger who set the world record for surviving the most lightning strikes: seven times, between 1942 and 1977. Greenbaum ambles around inside the joke for several minutes, building digres-
sions, unearthing absurdities, detonating lit-
tle moments of surprise, before finding his way back for the final flourish.

His favorite project right now is a comedy-magic show he’s been developing for the past

media orchestral work co-created by Pulit-
zer Prize-winning composer Du Yun, Ph.D. ’06, about human migration and the flight of refugees. And for the past several months, he has collaborated with Grammy-winning musician and producer Noah Georgeson on an album, to be released by summer 2020, that combines classical South Asian music with his own songwriting.

Born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, he is the son of dissident journalists; his fa-
ther has been jailed repeatedly, and in 2011 the family fled the country for more than a year after receiving death threats. Sethi
arrived at Harvard in September 2002, exactly a year after 9/11. “Everywhere I went, people were kind of cagey about Muslims,” he recalls. “Like, ‘Ooh, what do Muslims really believe?’” Even as he felt pressure to explain, a part of him was searching, too:

“...and not quite having recourse to one.”

He found it in a class on Islamic culture in contemporary societies, taught by professor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic religion and cultures Ali Asani. For the first time, Sethi learned about the role the arts had always played in Muslims’ understanding of their faith. He learned that Islam was not only politics and theology but what Asani called...
“heart-mind knowledge”: that before it was codified into scripture, the religion had begun as an aesthetic tradition that sought “to explain God through beauty.” The class unlocked something in Sethi. He began to see the old folksongs he’d grown up with in a new light—ghazals (love poems) and qawwalis (devotional songs) handed down by the Sufis, Islamic mystics whose practice emphasizes pluralism, tolerance, and an inward search for the divine. He’d heard them embedded in movies and advertisements and jingles on the radio—“just a part of our cultural DNA”—but they’d always seemed separate from religion, and lesser; now he understood they were neither.

He abandoned his planned economics fo-
Forgive, but Don’t Forget
...and don’t always forgive
by Lincoln Caplan

The first person President Donald Trump pardoned, in August 2017, was Sheriff Joe Arpaio. He was infamous for being brutal to undocumented immigrants and others in his shameful jails, and cheered on by neo-Nazis. The month before, a federal judge had found Arpaio guilty of criminal contempt, which carried a jail sentence of up to six months, for “flagrant disregard” of a court order. He had refused to stop harassing and arresting Latinos without any basis for suspicion that they had committed a crime. In the 2016 elections, Arpaio lost his race for a seventh term in Maricopa County, Arizona, apparently because the county no longer wanted a sheriff who engaged in what the Justice Department called “unconstitutional policing.” But in the presidential election, Arpaio helped push the county and the state for Trump, who advanced his own anti-immigrant cru-

When Should Law Forgive?
by Martha Minow
(W.W. Norton, $27.95)